



International Observatory of Mayors
Living Together

CASE STUDY

Migration Help Desk- Johannesburg

CASE STUDY NO 2

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Migration Help Desk

1. Context

Lying at the centre of the largest urban conurbation in sub-Saharan Africa, the city of Johannesburg is situated in the urban region named “Gauteng,” a province that is almost entirely urban and that has the political status of a province. Gauteng is home to 7.3 million people: about one-third of the national urban population of 21.8 million. At the last census in 1996, the population of Johannesburg itself was about 2.6 million. (Migration and Access Housing in CoJ, 2002). The city faced a continued influx of immigration and in-migration during the last decades, which caused rising tensions within the society, especially in 2008 with the xenophobic attacks. In 2007, the executive mayor, Amos Masondo, created the Migrant Help Desk as part of the Migrants Policy and Strategy. The Migrant Help Desk is located within the Unit of Human Development: Community Development Department. The initiative is supported by both the Executive Mayor and the MEC for Community Development.

Both regular and irregular migrants use services and are residents of socially excluded areas targeted for assistance from which they can benefit. They also tend to participate in the informal economy, and they are accused by certain organized groupings – rightly or wrongly – of being illegitimate competitors for scarce social resources, including low or semi-skilled employment opportunities and trade. The conflicts arising from these accusations and their consequences must be managed starkly at the local level, as they were in the wave of xenophobic attacks directed against internal and cross-border migrants living in Johannesburg’s disadvantaged communities that occurred over the course of May and June 2008, and recently in April 2015.

By and large, this can be attributed the country’s history of institutionalized racism. Also contributing to this at a city-level are high inequality (Gini coefficient: 0.64), poverty (with a quarter of the population living below the poverty line) and unemployment rate (at about 25%).

2. Objectives

In essence, the city’s policy on migration is aimed at facilitating the integration of migrants to a level where immigrants have similar participation patterns compared to the non-immigrant citizens concerning the community structures, the fulfilment of civic duties as



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well as the contribution of migrants to the economic, cultural, religious and social life and system in Johannesburg.

3. Implementation

The tools to oversee the implementation of the city's policy on immigration are outlined as follows:

1. Reception and Tracking of New Arrivals

The reception strategy is critical as it enables the newcomers and established migrants to have an avenue to receive information, to connect to opportunities that will allow them to participate in the active life of their communities and also to empower them with the necessary tools to navigate the city, and track them as they do.

2. Migrant Help Desk

This is the first point for new arrivals or established migrants in the city. It is the hub providing multi-media information on the city and it facilitates connections to various resources that are critical to migrants' adaptation in the city.

3. Language Centre

Language is a key tool of integration. The role that the city can play in the learning of indigenous languages and or English is critical in promoting inclusion.

4. Orientation Programme for New Arrivals

Education programme targeting migrants will be set up in all the Migrant Help Desks. The aim of the education programme is to assist the migrants to understand the culture of the host country, their duties, rights and obligations and the knowledge of the law emphasising zero tolerance to crime.

5. Education Programmes Targeting Locals

This is an education programme, as opposed to an awareness campaign, to be instituted among the locals – through schools, churches and community based organisations, on issues of migration. High-risk areas (those with a higher probability of xenophobic attack break-outs) are prioritized.



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6. Participation

The key outcome here is to promote the participation of migrants in the decision making processes of community activities designed for their benefit and is facilitated through platforms such as school governing bodies, police forums, business forums and so forth.

7. Information Management System

This is a database of information on migrants which draws data from other migration, human rights, security and statistical agencies. It is updated on a quarterly basis.

8. Inter-sectoral Collaboration to Advance the Integration of Migrants

The Johannesburg Migration Advisory Panel is a forum made up of non-governmental organisations and city departments that meets on monthly basis to look at challenges that confront migrants. The Johannesburg Migration Advisory Committee facilitates the integration of plans of the various key departments that have an impact on the migrants in the various spheres of government and it is chaired by the executive mayor.

9. Calendar Events

The Heritage Month is the celebration of cultures and values. Its aim is to change misperceptions about other African cultures and traditions. The International Migrants Day attempts to meet the same objectives. The International Human Rights Day on the other hand, serves to educate and empower communities with the relevant human rights obligations information.

4. Partners

Partnerships span from local NGOs with interest on migration issues (Action Support Centre and the Consortium for Refugees and Migrants in South Africa) and human rights organizations (Lawyers for Human Rights), to other spheres of government whose mandate is to track documentation of cross-border groups (Department of Home Affairs), law enforcement (the South African Police Services and Department of Justice & Constitutional Development), statistical bodies (Statistics South Africa) – and also international NGOs (United Nation High Commission for Refugees, International Organisation for Migration and Amnesty International). The National Treasury also provides with policy support to source funding from various donors.



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5. Funding

The MHD is resourced from the city's Department of Social Development budget and is a fully funded mandate with representation in all seven regions of the municipality.

6. Lessons and results

The beneficiaries of the MHD include all documented and undocumented migrants, that is, both internal and cross-border migrants, the staff of the city and the broader public. Currently there are migrants from about 25 different countries who are utilising the services of the MHD. Some of the countries include Zimbabwe, Malawi, Zambia, Lesotho, Mozambique, Botswana, Swaziland, and various countries in Asia.

As of 2008, a total of 2,975 migrants have visited the city's Migrant Help Desks for various services – including but not limited to general enquiries, documentation, education, health care, social services, business licenses, repatriation as well as resettlement information. It also serves as a first contact and directs the migrants toward the resources that may be useful for them, such as the other tools presented previously in this document.

7. Structural issues

1. Developing trust with undocumented migrants

Given that the MHD is a government institution that renders services to migrants, there have been elements of mistrust expressed from within the migrant community. People felt that if they approach the MHD and are undocumented, their information gathered by the MHD will be passed on to authorities and they may be arrested and deported. These factors have limited people from coming in to the MHD. The MHD is a government institution that has been tasked with facilitating service delivery towards meeting the city's common citizenship commitment, and therefore, needs to find ways to encourage migrants and to build trust with the migrant community as well as dissipate underlying fears.



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2. Advancing human development in the city of Johannesburg by addressing social exclusion through prospects for social inclusion

The MHD has localized a point of contact and access for the migrant community. This is a progressive approach taken by the city towards ensuring that migrants feel that they are part of an inclusive city that treats all residents equally and attempts to create opportunities for their integration into the fabric of the city. Many of the migrants in the city are highly skilled and have the potential to contribute to the economy. Through the Help Desk, the migrants are assisted with relevant information on available services and a network of organisations that offer support.

3. Raising awareness and lobbying government on issues relating to migrants

The MHD, through its direct interaction with the myriad of issues that migrants face in Johannesburg as well as in other parts of the country, is optimally positioned to raise awareness, inform as well as lobby government on these challenges and to suggest areas of reform and improvement.

4. Multiculturalism in Johannesburg

The city has come to understand how crucial it is for these communities to have the opportunity to reside in a safe environment wherein they can openly practice their way of life and to coexist peacefully with other communities residing in the city.

5. Linking locals and foreign nationals

The MHD has been useful to South Africans, particularly for those who have employed foreign nationals. Local employees, in particular, were excited to learn about the procedures and the resources available for migrants and that the MHD refers people to useful places. This reiterated the importance and the benefit of having a service like the MHD in the city.

6. There is no single solution

There is no blueprint solution for challenges brought forward to the MHD by both internal and cross border migrants. Each situation is unique and requires a unique response. In this, MHD staff is acutely aware of the need to be sensitive and open to people's differences, their circumstances, and to expect an array of diverse challenges.

7. Maintaining resources and references: a bank of knowledge and information

It is also essential for the MHD to maintain relationships with stakeholders to be in a position to best support migrants who approach the Help Desk. The relationships with stakeholders and the maintenance of a network are of paramount importance to the MHD.



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8. Leadership

The issue of migrants is both emotional and political and requires proper, committed leadership; leadership that provides guidance and affords it priority at a political level.

9. Consultation

Consultation with and the involvement of various stakeholders, community members, the intended recipients of the MHD initiative and other key partners in the process is critical.

10. Documenting the contributions of migrants

The city should find a way of documenting the present contributions made by migrants to the city as well as those that were made in the past. The aim of this would be to create a documented account or record of the migrant experience in Johannesburg. In addition to this, a dialogue should be facilitated and should be driven by the leaders within communities who encourage the spirit of multiculturalism that is approached with respect, tolerance, kindness and humanity.

11. Inter-sectoral collaboration and coordination

Plans provide direction in how to go about implementing policy and strategy and the milestones identified within plans are constructive in measuring progress. They also identify the key role players needed for the successful implementation of an initiative like the MHD. The plan for the MHD, which is a part of the Common Citizenship Programme, identified in the city's overarching business plan (Integrated Development Plan), is particularly interesting in that it is driven by one department but requires the interaction and commitment of numerous departments, such as health, education, policing and others.

In the case of the MHD, there was inter-sectoral collaboration and coordination that was needed and this was made explicit from the start with plans developed to facilitate processes of consultation and working together. Hence, the MHD plan created a paradigm that forced departments and the responsible people within departments to interact inter-sectorally and collaboratively.



8. Project transferability

The city has already shared its MHD model with other cities locally – one of which has operationalized it. To replicate this successfully, it is imperative for the interested locality to understand and analyse its own context and specific issues with regard to migrants such that the approach taken is responsive to the particular context.

The city, however, maintains that Johannesburg has not yet reached a level of perfection and is open to new learning opportunities. It has learned that it is responsible for ensuring that the human development agenda is constantly shaped by the voices and realities of communities and is dedicated to finding ways and means to enable this.

9. Conclusion

The Migrant Help Desk (MHD) is part of a larger initiative of the city's Migrants Policy and Strategy that includes diverse initiatives, but through its central position in the process and its accessibility, it influences positively the issues that migrants and local populations were and are facing, and helps to lower the tensions within the society.